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# PUBLIC EXPLANATIONS OF UNEMPLOYMENT IN A CANADIAN CITY

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ABSTRACT

PUBLIC EXPLANATIONS OF UNEMPLOYMENT IN A CANADIAN CITY *

Despite unemployment's political saliency, there has been no Canadian research on the public's explanations of the problem. This study of the opinions of a random sample of Edmonton residents suggests that public explanations do not fit neatly into the "structural, individualistic, and fatalistic" typology proposed by previous research. There is a pervasive tendency to lay blame for high unemployment on world-wide recession, government policies, and trade unions, but also to blame the problem on the personal failings of the unemployed. Compared to the British public, Canadians seem more likely to blame unions and the moral laxity of the jobless. Few important socio-demographic predictors of specific explanations of unemployment were identified. Only when the opinion in question directly blamed the unemployed for their predicament, were the unemployed less likely than the employed to agree with it.

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## INTRODUCTION

Unemployment has been a highly charged political issue in Canada since the early 1980s. Despite the present federal government's emphasis on deficit reduction, unemployment remains upper-most in the minds of the public. For instance, a September 1984 national opinion poll revealed that 66% of the respondents were worried that they or the family breadwinner would lose their jobs in the near future (Globe and Mail, 17 Dec. 1984). Moreover, these same respondents rated unemployment, rather than the deficit, as the country's top economic priority by almost a two-to-one margin. [1] A Gallop Poll in early 1985 found that Canadians were less optimistic about unemployment than they had been a year earlier, with 42% of respondents expecting it to increase (Globe and Mail, 28 Jan. 1985).

High unemployment is not a totally new phenomenon in Canada. Certain regions and population sub-groups have long experience with the problem (Shaw, 1985). But with unemployment becoming a national crisis, researchers have begun to look more systematically at its nature, causes and consequences. Although the Canadian research literature is certainly not large, there have been some attempts to examine the social-psychological impacts of unemployment (Grayson, 1986; Johnson, 1984; Burke, 1985; Kirsh, 1983; Krahn et al., 1985), its demographic determinants (Foote and Li, 1985), the impact of labour markets (Butler and Smith, 1983), and political responses and policy implications (Struthers, 1983; Shaw, 1985). [2] But a neglected topic has been the nature of public attitudes toward unemployed individuals and the perceived causes of unemployment. Other than scant information from public opinion polls, there are no Canadian data on the subject. This paper addresses the topic by considering the beliefs about unemployment of a random sample of Edmonton residents. Two basic questions guide the research: (a) how do people explain high levels of unemployment?; and (b) what are the sources of variation in explanations of unemployment?

Answers to these questions have important policy implications. Whether or not people are sympathetic to the jobless will influence public acceptance of programs aimed at alleviating the problem. Societal views about unemployment can have an

impact on how the jobless themselves explain their plight which, in turn, might influence their ability to cope with the situation (Furnham, 1984; Kelvin and Jarret, 1985). To the extent that the unemployed blame government and businesses for their situation and see their problem as shared by others, political agitation may result (Feagin, 1975; Schlozman and Verba, 1979; Grayson, 1986). Moreover, if there are widespread public misconceptions about the causes and consequences of unemployment, effective solutions may require public educational campaigns. In short, policy efforts must take into account subjective as well as objective realities. As Feather (1974:199) commented about public explanations of poverty: "The perceived reasons might not correspond with the actual reasons, but attempts at social change must nevertheless take the subjective opinions into account, especially if they are widespread within the community."

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Sociological research on beliefs about social inequality has tended to concentrate on its relatively abstract dimensions (e.g. perceptions of class structure and political ideology), rather than on opinions about social welfare. Nonetheless, a body of mainly psychological research does deal with popular images of social welfare. Research in this area began by examining how people explain poverty, later shifting its emphasis to the subject of attitudes toward unemployment. Feather's (1974) comparison of attitudes toward poverty and the poor in the United States and Australia has been most influential. He demonstrated that public explanations of poverty can be grouped into three main types: individual explanations that view poverty as a consequence of personal deficits (lack of ability or effort) and that essentially "blame the victim" (Ryan, 1971); structural explanations that locate the source of the problem in external social and economic forces (e.g. failure of government or the private sector); and fatalistic explanations assigning causal priority to luck and fate.

Subsequent research has tended to rely on these three categories for the classification of lay explanations of unemployment. Furnham (1982, 1984), for example, collected data from a non-random sample of British adults and concluded that attributional patterns fit the typology of individualistic, societal, and fatalistic

explanations. But more recent studies in Britain (Furnham and Lewis, 1986:150; Gaskell and Smith, 1985), Australia (Feather and O'Brien, 1985) and South Africa (Labuschagne et al., 1985:130), of adult as well as youth samples, challenge the validity of this classification scheme. It may be that a typology developed from information on attitudes toward poverty may not be directly applicable to explanations of unemployment.

Furnham (1982:347) concluded that there was greater public support for societal than for individual explanations of unemployment, a finding somewhat at odds with the popular ideology of individualism found in capitalist societies (Feagin, 1975; Smith, 1985). Other research has suggested that the widespread anti-welfare sentiments found in the British press in the late 1970s might be related to public atttitudes towards the unemployed. Golding and Middleton (1982) reported that many of the 630 respondents in their study expressed negative attitudes toward the poor and the unemployed. Structural explanations of unemployment, albeit expressed obliquely, were quite common, but no more so than explanations focusing on individual deficits. The researchers summarized the attitudes of their subjects by concluding that: "Explanations were either in vague deus ex machina terms, or in terms of the willful idleness of the unemployed. Unemployment thus seemed either a malevolent visitation of inpenetrable world forces plaguing a once great nation, or the aggregate result of a million acts of indolence and cynicism by a pampered and ill-disciplined work force." (Golding and Middleton, 1982:168).

The finding that Americans, moreso than Australians, were inclined to favour individualistic explanations of poverty (Feather, 1974) may have led to the assumption that, compared to other western countries, there is a more pronounced tendency in America to blame the unemployed for their own plight. Evidence from the U.S.A. certainly does indicate a pervasive "blaming the victim" view of the poor and the unemployed (Schlozman and Verba, 1979; Kluegal and Smith, 1981:31). Schlozman and Verba (1979:192) reported that 46% of the employed and 36% of the unemployed respondents in a national survey believed that most of the unemployed could find jobs if they looked hard enough. Although subsequent interviews with a small sample of the

unemployed did not reveal a pattern of self-blame, there was "an unmistakable fibre of individualism embedded in the systematic interpretations of the causes of unemployment." (1979:198). Yet given Golding and Middleton's (1982) findings of strong individualistic sentiments in the British population as well, the question about cultural differences in the degree of commitment to one type of explanation over another remains open. Directly comparable Canadian findings are lacking, but there is evidence that individualistic explanations are frequently expressed (Gonick, 1978:23). Even those who have become unemployed frequently internalize the problem (Grayson, 1986).

Studies examining beliefs about unemployment have had limited success in identifying socioeconomic and demographic correlates of individualistic and structural explanations. Furnham (1982) found few noteworthy differences by age or sex in his British study. American research has revealed few strong links between socio-demographic factors, other than race (blacks are more likely than whites to favour structural explanations of unemployment), and preferences for one type of explanation over another (Kluegel and Smith, 1981:41). Furnham (1982) observed individualistic explanations to be more acceptable to high and middle income earners in his British study. Conversely, the unemployed members of his sample were less inclined than those with jobs to favour such explanations. Conservative voters, who are probably better off financially and ideologically more individualistic, were also more receptive to such explanations of unemployment. Such findings could be explained with reference to attribution theory -- people will blame their misfortunes on causes beyond their control while taking more credit for their successes (Furnham, 1984:62). However, as Fraser et al. (1985) demonstrate, support for the hypothesis that the employed will be individualistic in their explanations while the unemployed will favour structural explanations is somewhat equivocal (Gaskell and Smith, 1985:76).

The essentially ambivalent nature of public opinion towards the unemployed (Kelvin and Jarret, 1985:93) is captured in the finding that the least educated (and therefore lower socio-economic status) persons are often most individualistic in their explanations of unemployment (Furnham, 1982; Golding and Middleton, 1982). Indeed, Golding and Middleton (1982) found the most negative attitudes towards the

unemployed and the poor among the least privileged members of their sample -- the unskilled manual workers, the poorly paid, senior citizens, and even welfare recipients. Nilson (1981:535) has suggested that such unemployment ideologies may be generated by an alternative "class dynamic", that is, those most vulnerable to the ravages of unemployment have a vested interest in attributing their relative success in finding work, no matter how menial and unrewarding, to the same kind of individual factors that explain the failures of the unemployed. In this way, the working poor cognitively and emotionally distance themselves from the "undeserving poor" or the "work shy". As Golding and Middleton (1982:180) put it, "the potential threat of unemployment and fear of disposal to the welfare scrap-heap prompt redefinition of those already there." Thus, the proposition that higher status and more affluent individuals are more inclined to favour individualistic explanations of unemployment is not consistently supported.

This review of the relevant research literature identifies a number of inconsistent results and partially answered questions. It also allows us to restate our initial research questions much more precisely: (1) Can explanations of unemployment be separated into individualistic, structural, and fatalistic types?; (2) Assuming that some sort of typology of unemployment attitudes can be constructed, are Canadians, at least as represented by residents of one large city, more likely to subscribe to one type of explanation than another?; (3) How do the types of explanations favoured by Canadians differ from those put forward by British respondents who have been the focus of much of this research?; [3] and (4) What are the sources of variation in public explanations of unemployment? Specifically, are higher status, more advantaged individuals more likely to hold individualistic opinions about unemployment? Does higher education lead to a preference for structural explanations? Is there a relationship between voting preference and beliefs about unemployment among Canadians? And, finally, are there any additional correlations between types of explanation and basic demographic variables such as age and sex?

## SAMPLING AND MEASUREMENT

Our data come from the 1985 Edmonton Area Study (EAS), the ninth in a series of annual community surveys conducted by the Population Research Laboratory in the University of Alberta's Sociology Department. The population from which the EAS sample was drawn consisted of all persons, 18 years of age and older, living in a dwelling unit enumerated in the 1983 Edmonton civic census. A simple random sample of 545 dwelling units was drawn from the census list, and trained interviewers were sent to these dwellings. A quota system was used to choose male or female respondents in the designated households. A total of 421 adults completed one-hour long interviews during February and March of 1985, resulting in a final response rate of 77.3% (Kinzel, 1985).

Comparisons of sample characteristics with municipal census results demonstrate that the 1985 EAS sample adequately represents the population from which it was drawn. The median age of sample members was 34 years and 59% were married or living in a common law arrangement. Median household income was in the $26,000 to $27,999 range. A majority (63%; n = 265) were employed at the time of the survey, while 36 sample members were unemployed. Combining these two groups to represent the members of the labour force, we calculate an unemployment rate among the sample members of about 12%. This is just slightly less than the official unemployment rate for the city of Edmonton at the time of the survey.

In the interview, respondents were introduced to the subject of unemployment with the following comment: "As you know, unemployment has been at a high level in this country and province for several years. Different people have different opinions about the causes of this high unemployment. How much do you agree or disagree with the following opinions about this?" Respondents were then presented with 16 statements (see Table 1) and asked to state their level of agreement or disagreement with each on a 7-point Likert scale. The statements were modifications of those used by Furnham (1982), with the exception of two which we added (items 6 and 15 in Table 1).

Table 1: Explanations of Unemployment Ranked by Level of Agreement.

| | % Agree* |
|---|---|
| 1. World wide recession and inflation cause high unemployment. | 79.6 |
| 2. Many people don't have jobs because they are too choosy about accepting low-paying jobs. | 69.8 |
| 3. The policies and strategies of government are responsible for high unemployment. | 68.6 |
| 4. Unemployment is high because trade unions have priced their members out of a job. | 67.0 |
| 5. Many people don't have jobs because of their poor education and qualifications. | 54.1 |
| 6. Unemployment is high because unemployment insurance and welfare are too easy to get. | 53.9 |
| 7. Unemployment is high because of the introduction of widespread automation. | 50.1 |
| 8. Many people are unemployed because they are unwilling to move to places of work. | 44.5 |
| 9. Unemployment is high because people don't try hard enough to get jobs. | 38.5 |
| 10. Many people don't have jobs because they are sick or have physical handicaps. | 28.5 |
| 11. Many people are unemployed because of their lack of intelligence or ability. | 28.3 |
| 12. Unemployment is high because immigrants have taken up all available jobs. | 26.4 |
| 13. Incompetent managers are responsible for high unemployment. | 25.9 |
| 14. Unemployment is high because weak trade unions do not fight to keep jobs. | 22.8 |
| 15. Unemployment is high because too many married women are working. | 20.9 |
| 16. Many people don't have jobs because they just have bad luck. | 17.1 |

* Respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements, and answered on a 7-point scale [Strongly Disagree (1) - (7) Strongly Agree]. % Agree consists of all those answering with scores of 5, 6, or 7. N is somewhat less than 421 in each case because of missing data, except for statement 14 which was not answered by 7% of the sample.

We initially adopted Furnham's (1982) original wording for all but a few items. However, pretesting of the interview schedule revealed that respondents were confused by the list of statements, mainly because they had trouble relating each stimulus statement to the introductory comment about high rates of unemployment. On reconsidering the list of statements, we realized that they were actually addressing two questions. The first asked why unemployment was high, and the second asked why, given high unemployment, some people find jobs while others do not. To reduce the respondents' confusion, we added phrases like "unemployment is high because" and "many people do not have jobs because" to a number of Furnham's (1982) more truncated statements. Comparisons of the statements used in his study and ours appear in Table 3.

## RESULTS

### *The Structure of Public Explanations of Unemployment*

The first question we address is: can explanations of unemployment be separated into individualistic, structural, and fatalistic types? Furnham (1982) used factor analysis to see if the different explanations of unemployment separated into these a priori categories and, while acknowledging that it was not a very good fit, concluded that they did. Our factor analysis results, displayed in Table 2, clearly do not suggest a neat individual, structural and fatalistics set of categories.

Factor 1 contains four items focusing on the work values of those without work. These items imply that the jobless have chosen to be without work because it is easier to live in this manner than to exert oneself in the labour market. We have labelled this factor "individual work values" because it contains beliefs about the voluntary nature of unemployment. Factor 2 is composed of an additional four items also identifying characteristics of the unemployed, but these are "ascribed" characteristics (illness, lack of ability and so on). Unlike the beliefs in Factor 1, which directly blame the individual for lacking a work ethic, these statements refer to "individual attributes" over which the unemployed individual would have little or no control. In fact, "bad luck" appears in this factor. These first two factors reflect

Table 2: Total sample factor loadings. *

| | Factor 1 work values | Factor 2 indiv. attributes | Factor 3 Disappear-ing jobs | Factor 4 Govern-ment | Factor 5 Economy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Don't try hard enough to get jobs | .804 | .027 | -.018 | -.026 | -.095 |
| Unemployment insurance and welfare too easy to get | .679 | -.059 | .227 | -.070 | -.086 |
| Unwilling to move to places of work | .617 | .320 | .055 | .043 | -.079 |
| Too choosy about accepting low-paying jobs | .469 | .439 | .137 | -.267 | .162 |
| Lack of intelligence and ability | .194 | .660 | .109 | .154 | -.010 |
| Poor education and qualifications | .270 | .649 | -.109 | .342 | .036 |
| Sick or have physical handicaps | .003 | .603 | .213 | -.260 | .148 |
| Just bad luck | -.269 | .568 | .226 | -.113 | -.193 |
| Too many married women are working | .025 | .057 | .696 | -.109 | -.286 |
| Introduction of widespread automation | .074 | .252 | .666 | .099 | .165 |
| Immigrants have taken up all available jobs | .102 | .161 | .578 | .378 | -.074 |
| Unions have priced their members out of a job | .385 | -.032 | .511 | -.002 | .260 |
| Policies and strategies of government are responsible | -.130 | -.033 | .096 | .787 | .048 |
| World wide recession and inflation | -.158 | .190 | .111 | .174 | .741 |
| Incompetent managers are responsible | .049 | .251 | .248 | .331 | -.587 |

* Varimax rotated factor matrix. One item (weak trade unions) which appears in Tables 1 and 3 has been dropped from the analysis because of high levels of missing data.

historically based popular conceptions of deserving and non-deserving poor (Kelvin and Jarret, 1985:105). This distinction has been overlooked in previous research. Furnham (1982), for example, included both "work values" and "individual attributes" under the broad rubric of individualistic explanations.

Factor 3 combines four items identifying a diversity of beliefs about why jobs are disappearing. (women in the labour force, immigrants, automation, and trade unions). Factor 4 also addresses the issue of why jobs are disappearing, but blames government. And factor 5 places together two items (world wide recession and inflation, incompetent management) which essentially explain high rates of unemployment in terms of economic factors.

Table 2 does not identify a "fatalistic" factor. [5] One could conclude that factors 1 and 2 represent individualistic explanations, while factors 3 through 5 contain structural explanations. However, we would argue instead that when you begin with a set of specific statements addressing two related but different questions, the factors generated in a factor analysis will reflect these questions. In this analysis, factors 3, 4 and 5 all contain answers to a question about the causes of high unemployment. Factors 1 and 2 contain answers to a question about why some people find work while others do not. In a sense, this could be interpreted as a distinction between individual and structural beliefs, but it is probably more a function of the research instrument than of the pattern of public opinions. [6] We therefore conclude that the typology borrowed from the earlier "explanations of poverty" literature is inappropriate for studying beliefs about unemployment. The different statements used in this study can be more fruitfully grouped into "work values" and "individual attributes" explanations of why some find work while others do not, and several different types of explanation of why unemployment rates are high.

*Preferred Explanations of Unemployment*

Having decided how best to group these statements for subsequent analyses, we can return to Table 1 and our second question: are Canadians, represented by this Edmonton sample, more likely to favour one type of explanation over others? The 16

separate statements are ranked in this table by level of agreement, which varies considerably across the items. For example, while a full 80% of the sample agreed with the "world wide recession and inflation" explanation of high unemployment, only 17% agreed that "bad luck" explained why many people don't have jobs.

One useful way of grouping these statements is into three categories: those which elicited agreement from two-thirds or more of the sample, from between one-third and two-thirds of the sample, and from less than one-third of the sample. There does not appear to be any pattern whereby answers to one basic question (why is unemployment high?), as compared to answers to the other (why do some people fail to find work?), separate systematically into these three sub-groups. Previous studies have disagreed about whether individual or structural beliefs are more popular. Accepting these labels temporarily, we conclude that our respondents subscribe equally to both types of beliefs.

However, there are substantial variations within types. Four-fifths of the sample are willing to blame the world economy for high unemployment in Canada, and almost 70% blame the government and trade unions. About one-half of the respondents attribute unemployment, at least in part, to automation. But only one in four respondents are in agreement with statements that identify immigrants, incompetent management, weak trade unions, and female labour force participation as the source of the problem. With respect to statements focusing on ascribed characteristics or work values of the unemployed, there appears to be a tendency to favour the latter. About two-thirds of the sample agreed that many people are too choosy about accepting low-paying jobs, and 54% agreed that unemployment insurance and welfare are too easy to get. While 54% also agreed that poor education might be the problem, the other ascribed characteristic statements were acceptable to less than 30% of the sample.

*Cultural Differences*

Furnham (1982:341) reported average scores, separately for the employed and the unemployed, for each of the attitude statements used in his study. In order to

examine cultural differences in explanations of unemployment, we present his results (along with the actual wording of his statements) in Table 3, along with comparable results for the 265 employed and 36 unemployed members of our sample. The 16 statements have been separated into those addressing the question about high unemployment rates and those focusing on why some people fail to find work. Within each group, the statements are ordered by the level of agreement in our own sample.

Furnham found significant differences between the responses of employed and unemployed respondents for almost all of the statements. Our Canadian results identify statistically significant differences for only four of the items, those which directly blame the deficient work values of the jobless themselves. When unemployed Canadians are presented with statements which reflect negatively on their own character, they are more inclined to disagree than are those with jobs. But when the statements focus on ascribed characteristics of the unemployed, or address different reasons for high unemployment rates in general, the attitudes of the unemployed are not very different from those of the employed. It would appear that the unemployed in Furnham's British study hold a more distinct view of the causes of unemployment than do the jobless in our own study.

Given that Britain is a more class-based society than is Canada, a possible explanation for this cross-cultural difference could be that the unemployed in Britain have had more exposure to a counter-ideology which presents unemployment as a failure of capitalism. Furnham's observation that the British unemployed are more likely to accept "structural" explanations of unemployment also imply a similar explanation. However, when the actual content of these statements are examined (Table 3), we note that the British unemployed, compared to the employed, hold several fairly "reactionary" views, such as blaming trade unions for high wage demands and immigrants for taking away jobs. They are also significantly more inclined to favour explanations which attribute joblessness, including their own, to ascribed characteristics (sickness, handicaps, lack of education). In short, while the employed and the unemployed in this British study appear to hold more divergent attitudes than is the case in our Canadian study, it is difficult to argue that the British unemployed are a

Table 3: Employed and unemployed respondents' explanations of high unemployment: average scores in Edmonton and in Britain. #

| Why is unemployment high? | Edmonton @ Empl. | Edmonton @ Unempl. | Britain @ Empl. | Britain @ Unempl. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| World wide recession and inflation cause high unemployment. [World wide recession and inflation] | 5.38 | 5.61 | 5.81 * | 5.43 |
| The policies and strategies of government are responsible for high unemployment. [The policies and strategies of the present government.] | 5.17 | 5.58 | 5.95 | 5.67 |
| Unemployment is high because trade unions have priced their members out of a job. [Trade unions have priced their members out of a job.] | 5.00 | 4.72 | 3.63 * | 4.15 |
| Unemployment is high because of the introduction of widespread automation. [The introduction of widespread automation.] | 4.08 | 4.50 | 4.30 | 4.91 |
| Unemployment is high because immigrants have taken up all available jobs. [An influx of immigrants have taken up all available jobs.] | 2.94 | 3.23 | 2.68 * | 4.08 |
| Incompetent managers are responsible for high unemployment. [Incompetent industrial management with poor planning.] | 3.46 | 3.40 | 5.06 * | 4.54 |
| Unemployment is high because weak trade unions do not fight to keep jobs. [Weak trade unions that do not fight to keep jobs.] | 3.24 | 3.25 | 3.20 * | 4.42 |
| Unemployment is high because too many married women are working. | 2.67 | 2.26 | ---- | ---- |
| **Why do some people not find jobs?** | | | | |
| Many people don't have jobs because they are too choosy about accepting low-paying jobs. [Unemployed people are too fussy and proud to accept some jobs.] | 5.05 * | 4.11 | 3.11 | 3.43 |
| Many people don't have jobs because of their poor education and qualifications. [Poor education and qualifications among unemployed people.] | 4.39 | 3.83 | 3.60 * | 4.45 |
| Unemployment is high because unemployment insurance and welfare are too easy to get. [Unemployed people can earn more money on social security.] | 4.44 * | 3.11 | 2.79 | 2.69 |
| Many people are unemployed because they are unwilling to move to places of work. [Unwillingness of unemployed to move to places of work.] | 4.16 * | 3.33 | 3.68 * | 2.49 |
| Unemployment is high because people don't try hard enough to get jobs. [Unemployed people don't try hard enough to get jobs.] | 3.58 * | 2.61 | 4.85 * | 3.79 |
| Many people don't have jobs because they are sick or have physical handicaps. [Sickness and physical handicap among unemployed people.] | 3.38 | 3.25 | 2.86 * | 4.26 |
| Many people are unemployed because of their lack of intelligence or ability. [Lack of intelligence or ability among the unemployed.] | 3.42 | 2.89 | 2.54 * | 3.24 |
| Many people don't have jobs because they just have bad luck. [Just bad luck] | 2.52 | 2.64 | 2.27 * | 2.73 |
| (Sub-sample size) | (265) | (36) | (190) | (100) |

# British results from Furnham (1982)

@ Respondents in the British study answered on a 7-point scale [Important (1) - (7) Unimportant]. Average scores reported by Furnham (1982: 347) were reflected so that higher values represent greater importance, in order to allow comparisons with the Edmonton study.

* Differences between means for the employed and the unemployed are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

more class-conscious group than are their neighbours with jobs.

There might also be cultural differences in the general level of agreement with these statements. Table 3 shows that Canadians as a whole are more likely than Britains to agree that trade unions have priced their members out of jobs. This is not surprising, given the given the recent labour relations climate in Alberta. The rapid economic growth of the 1970s, with relatively high wage settlements for some unions, ended abruptly with the recession of the 1980s. Unemployment hit a post-WW2 high and both employers and government tried to pin at least some of the blame on unions, especially in the building trades. Moreover, Canadian respondents are generally less likely than the British respondents to blame incompetent management for high unemployment. Canadians are also more likely, regardless of employment status, to agree that the unemployed are too choosy about accepting low-paying jobs, and that unemployment insurance and welfare are too easy to get. Thus, while we find no evidence of distinct class-conscious attitudes among the British unemployed (or the Canadian unemployed, for that matter), a general conclusion might be that Canadians are somewhat less inclined to blame industrial management and somewhat more inclined to blame unions for high unemployment. They are also somewhat more likely to agree that the unemployed have a weaker work ethic, or are too choosy about jobs. [7]

*Sources of Variation in Explanations*

The following analyses address our question about sources of variation in popular explanations of unemployment. In order to reduce the number of dependent variables, the items loading on the first three factors (Table 2) were combined into indices labelled "work values", "individual attributes", and "disappearing jobs". [8] Table 4 presents one-way analyses of variance showing the relationship between a variety of measures of unemployment experience and these three indices of unemployment attitudes. A clear pattern is observed. Those with more unemployment experience (current employment status, unemployment in the past, expectations of unemployment, and unemployment of other household members) are significantly less likely to agree that those without jobs are in that predicament because of their lack of motivation or poorly developed work ethic. However, there are no significant differences by

Table 4: Unemployment experience and explanations of unemployment.

| Independent variable | (N)[@] | means on dependent variables[#] work values | | indiv. attributes | disappearing jobs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Current employment status: | | | | | |
| Employed | (371-380) | 4.40 | * | 3.54 | 3.80 |
| Unemployed | (34-36) | 3.29 | | 3.15 | 3.63 |
| Unemployed last year: | | | | | |
| No | (290-298) | 4.47 | * | 3.52 | 3.81 |
| Yes | (114-118) | 3.87 | | 3.44 | 3.74 |
| Expect to be unemployed next year: | | | | | |
| No | (276-283) | 4.47 | | 3.46 | 3.80 |
| Maybe | (58-60) | 3.78 | * | 3.56 | 3.79 |
| Yes | (70-73) | 4.05 | | 3.63 | 3.74 |
| Other hh. members unemployed last year: | | | | | |
| No | (302-312) | 4.41 | * | 3.52 | 3.80 |
| Yes | (102-104) | 3.96 | | 3.45 | 3.75 |
| Number of times ever unemployed: | | | | | |
| Never | (188-193) | 4.35 | | 3.56 | 3.86 |
| Once | (80-84) | 4.35 | * | 3.38 | 3.60 |
| Two to five times | (97-100) | 4.44 | | 3.46 | 3.95 |
| Six or more times | (35-37) | 3.60 | | 3.61 | 3.43 |

[#] Indices created from highly loading items on factors one, two and three (Table 2).

[@] Sub-sample size ranges given because of differing amounts of missing data on the dependent variables.

* Differences between means are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

unemployment experience in the other two dependent variable indices. As we observed in Table 3, only when statements clearly blame moral laxity on the part of the jobless do we find the unemployed more likely to reject this popular belief. If the beliefs in question focus on reasons for disappearing jobs, or on the ascribed characteristics of the unemployed, personal experience with unemployment is not a significant source of variation. The unemployed in Edmonton appear willing to reject the dominant ideology only when its acceptance logically entails self-condemnation.

We have noted that previous research has found few important demographic correlates of explanations of unemployment. Table 5 displays the relationships between sex, age, and marital status and the three attitude indices. Men and women do not differ in a significant manner in their commitment to beliefs about the work values or individual attributes of the unemployed. However, women do have a significantly higher mean score on the "disappearing jobs" index. It may be that women are more conscious of jobs disappearing, given that many women are employed in service sector jobs where new labour displacing technologies have been introduced.

Age is significantly associated with each of these three dependent variables. These age effects may also be responsible for the observed relationship between marital status and beliefs (single respondents are frequently older people). In each case, it is the very oldest age group (65 and older) who are most likely to agree. This may be demonstrating a real age effect on these specific attitudes, or it may be reflecting a greater tendency of the elderly to agree with attitude statements in general. Whatever the explanation of this relationship, we also wish to highlight the pronounced tendency of younger respondents to agree with statements about the weak work ethic of the unemployed. This finding challenges the belief that youth have more liberal attitudes.

Table 6 contains additional one-way analyses of variance with education, occupation, household income, and political party preference as independent variables. British research has found that less educated respondents are frequently more in agreement with beliefs blaming the unemployed for their own plight. We do not find this to be the case in our study. Education is not significantly associated with opinions

Table 5: Demographic correlates of unemployment explanations.

| Independent variable | (N)[@] | means on dependent variables [#] work values | indiv. attributes | disappearing jobs |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sex: | | | | |
| Female | (207-216) | 4.25 | 3.55 | 3.91 * |
| Male | (198-200) | 4.35 | 3.44 | 3.65 |
| Age: | | | | |
| under 25 years | (76-78) | 4.37 | 3.48 | 3.68 |
| 25 - 34 years | (130-134) | 4.43 | 3.31 | 3.63 |
| 35 - 44 years | (77-80) | 4.10 * | 3.47 * | 3.69 * |
| 45 - 54 years | (52-58) | 3.93 | 3.44 | 3.93 |
| 55 - 64 years | (31-33) | 3.95 | 3.61 | 3.62 |
| 65 and older | (31-34) | 4.94 | 4.38 | 4.82 |
| Marital status/living arrangements: | | | | |
| Married/common law | (240-247) | 4.14 * | 3.47 | 3.70 |
| Living alone (single, separated, divorced, widowed) | (165-170) | 4.53 | 3.55 | 3.92 |

[#] Indices created from highly loading items on factors one, two and three (Table 2).

[@] Sub-sample size ranges given because of differing amounts of missing data on the dependent variables.

* Differences between means are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Table 6: Social status, education, political preference and explanations of unemployment.

| Independent variable | (N) [@] | means on dependent variables [#] work values | indiv. attributes | disappearing jobs |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Education: | | | | |
| less than 10 years | (45-52) | 4.25 | 3.75 | 4.09 |
| 10 or 11 years | (60-62) | 4.37 | 3.50 | 4.03 |
| 12 years | (89-92) | 4.23 | 3.63 | 4.20 * |
| 13 to 15 years | (131-133) | 4.41 | 3.41 | 3.61 |
| 16 or more years | (75-77) | 4.20 | 3.37 | 3.27 |
| Occupation: | | | | |
| Managerial/professional | (124-126) | 4.31 | 3.28 | 3.42 |
| Clerical/sales/services | (162-172) | 4.35 | 3.63 | 4.04 * |
| Other occupations ♦ | (100-103) | 4.25 | 3.55 | 3.88 |
| Keeping house/ student/NR | (15-16) | 3.98 | 3.59 | 3.56 |
| Total (pre-tax) 1984 household income: | | | | |
| less than $12,000 | (61-68) | 4.38 | 3.78 | 4.14 |
| $12,000 - 23,999 | (91-98) | 4.45 | 3.55 | 3.92 |
| $24,000 - 35,999 | (72-73) | 4.23 | 3.58 | 3.87 * |
| $36,000 - 49,999 | (73-75) | 4.37 | 3.27 | 3.71 |
| $50,000 - 69,999 | (46-48) | 4.28 | 3.59 | 3.40 |
| $70,000 or more | (29) | 4.08 | 3.12 | 3.47 |
| Political preference (federal): | | | | |
| Progressive Conservative | (212-217) | 4.48 | 3.44 | 3.89 |
| Liberal | (50-53) | 3.95 * | 3.50 | 3.60 |
| New Democratic Party | (67-70) | 4.01 | 3.54 | 3.62 |
| Other/wouldn't vote/ NR/don't know/etc. | (73-78) | 4.26 | 3.64 | 3.76 |

[#] Indices created from highly loading items on factors one, two and three (Table 2).

[@] Sub-sample size ranges given because of differing amounts of missing data on the dependent variables.

* Differences between means are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

♦ Mainly blue-collar occupations with construction the largest category.

about why the unemployed have failed to obtain jobs (the "work values" and the "individual attributes" indices). However, our less educated respondents are more inclined to agree with statements about disappearing jobs. Further analyses of the individual items forming the "disappearing jobs" index reveal that it is the statements about immigrants taking jobs, and about automation being responsible for lost jobs, which elicit the most agreement from the less educated sample members. Education does not have a significant effect on opinions about trade unions, or about married women working. [9]

Occupation and household income are measures that locate respondents in the stratification system. These social status variables are not systematically related to either the "work values" or the "individual attributes" indices, but are significantly associated with the "disappearing jobs" index. Individuals with clerical, sales and service occupations have a higher average score on this dependent variable, as do those with lower incomes (Table 6). Further analyses (bi-variate and multi-variate; results not displayed) suggest that education may be the primary source of these variations in attitude. The more educated sample members have higher household incomes and are less likely to be in the lower paid occupation. And, as noted above, they tend to be less supportive of the specific statements making up this index, particularly the statements about immigrants and automation. In brief, there may be less of a "social class" effect on unemployment attitudes in Canada than in Britain. This does not mean, of course, that negative attitudes about the unemployed are less pronounced in Canada (as we have observed in our discussion of Table 3). Instead, there appear to be fewer differences across status groups in the level of commitment to specific types of beliefs. [10]

Finally, Table 6 also shows that political party preference is related, in the expected manner, to these unemployment attitudes. Supporters of the Progressive Conservative party are more inclined to agree that some people are unemployed because they lack commitment to the work ethic. This is not surprising, given the free enterprise ideology of the Tories and their emphasis on individual effort as the key to economic success. There appears to be little difference in commitment to this

type of belief between those favouring the Liberal and the New Democratic Party.

## DISCUSSION

Can explanations of unemployment, as expressed by members of a random sample of adults resident in a large Canadian city, be separated into individualistic, structural, and fatalistic types? Our factor analysis results suggest that the transfer of this typology from the "explanations of poverty" literature may be inappropriate. Statements concerned with the causes of high rates of unemployment could be separated into three basic types, identifying different reasons for disappearing jobs, the failure of government, and global/national economic factors. Other statements focused on the related issue of the inability of some people to find jobs. Our factor analysis distinguished between statements which blamed the jobless for lack of motivation and others which identified personal attributes beyond the responsibility of the unemployed themselves. While we might use the terms structural and individualistic to separate the two basic types of explanation, it would be more useful to highlight the diversity of answers to these two basic questions. Forcing all of these distinctly different types of opinion into two categories presents an overly simplified picture of the belief patterns of Canadians regarding the problem of unemployment.

There was clearly a wide range of support for specific opinions. Two-thirds or more of the sample agreed that high rates of unemployment were due to world wide recession and inflation, the policies of the government, and the actions of trade unions. Obviously, simultaneous agreement with more than one of such opinions is very common in Canada, as in Britain (Fraser et al., 1985:356). Seventy per-cent of the sample also agreed that many jobless are too choosy about what type of work they will accept, and over half agreed that easy access to unemployment insurance and welfare assistance contributed to the problem. In short, the tendency to lay blame for high unemployment on a variety of structural causes was widespread, as was the tendency to attribute blame for individual joblessness to failings of the victims themselves. On the other hand, only a minority of respondents blamed the shortage of jobs on immigrants (26%), or on married women entering the labour market (21%).

Previous research has hinted at differences between British and American public opinion on the issue of unemployment, suggesting that there may be a greater tendency to "blame the victim" among U.S. citizens. We cannot compare our findings to any equivalent U.S. data, but Furnham's (1982) data allow some tentative British comparisons. It appears as if Canadians are somewhat more likely than the British to blame unions for high unemployment and less likely to blame industrial management for the problem. Our Canadian respondents also appear to be more receptive to opinions about the jobless being too choosy about work or not being sufficiently motivated. The greater strength of the Labour party in Britain (compared to the NDP in Canada, and particularly in Alberta), the higher level of unionization, and the fact that recession and unemployment have cut more deeply into British economic life may help explain these cultural differences in explanations of unemployment. Relatively fewer Canadians are exposed to the left-wing analysis of unemployment espoused by many unions and the Labour party in Britain.

Furnham's (1982) British study found significant differences between employed and unemployed respondents on almost all of the attitude statements provided. Our study reveals statistically significant differences between the level of agreement of the employed and unemployed only if the opinion in question directly blames the unemployed person for a lack of effort. It appears as if the British unemployed share a more distinct perspective than do the Canadian unemployed, who are hard to distinguish from their more fortunate neighbours in this regard. However, it would be inappropriate to describe the British unemployed as a class-conscious group for, compared to the employed in Furnham's sample, they were more likely to be critical of unions and of immigrants, and more inclined to say that the jobless (themselves, in other words) were in this predicament because of illness, handicaps, or lack of education.

Like previous researchers in this area, we were able to identify few demographic predictors of differences in explanations of unemployment. The oldest sample members tended to be in greater agreement will all of the basic types of explanation. The youngest sample members were somewhat more likely to agree that

the unemployed were not sufficiently motivated, and women were somewhat more inclined to agree with statements suggesting reasons for disappearing jobs. Previous research has tended to find that lower status sample members are less supportive of opinions blaming the unemployed for their problem than are those of higher social status. On the other hand, the less educated are more accepting of such explanations. Our results are less complex, showing only that the less educated sample members are more in agreement with statements blaming high rates of unemployment on immigrants and on automation. In other words, there may be less of a "social class" effect on unemployment attitudes in Canada than in Britain. It appears as if specific beliefs about unemployment, while differing considerably in the level of agreement across the sample as a whole, are not concentrated within particular groups in the stratification system. Again, the absence of a distinct counter ideology regarding social inequality may underlie this cultural difference. Nonetheless, a small but significant difference in agreement with beliefs about the work ethic of the unemployed is observed when respondents are separated by political party preference. This appears consistent with one of the features of Canadian party politics (and especially Alberta politics), namely that different parties do not have clearly distinct class-based support.

In conclusion, this first Canadian study of unemployment attitudes has identified some cross-cultural differences while describing the preferred explanations of unemployment of a sample of urban Canadians. Future research should proceed to examine the link between attitudes and behaviour (see, for example, Fraser, et al., 1985). Are individuals who blame the government for high unemployment rates, for example, more likely to express this sentiment in voting behaviour or in lobbying efforts on behalf of the jobless? As high rates of unemployment persist in this country, will public attitudes, in general, begin to change? Trend analyses such as the recent study of 40 years of Gallup Poll data (Morris, 1985) would be necessary to answer this question. At the individual level of analysis, will extended periods of unemployment eventually have an impact on the beliefs (and behaviours) of the unemployed themselves? Our results show that the unemployed hold different opinions only when they are personally accused of laziness and poor motivation. Will chronic unemployment begin to have an effect on attitudes toward government, industry, and

labour? Longitudinal research which actually follows individuals over several years would be the only way to address this type of question.

## FOOTNOTES

1 Public opinion polls in the U.S.A. reveal similar widespread concern about the problem of unemployment (Morris, 1985).

2 The Canadian literature is only part of a larger body of work developing in the U.S.A., Europe and Australia, much of it with an emphasis on the effects on individuals, and indirectly on society, of prolonged periods of joblessness. While we do not develop this idea here, we do suspect that an underlying cause of the concern over the social-psychological effects of unemployment involves a fear that unemployment might undermine commitment to the work ethic and, ultimately, the principles of liberal-democracy. Similar concerns have been voiced over the even higher rates of youth unemployment in Canada and Britain (see Tanner et al., 1985).

3 The American studies on the topic do not allow as direct comparisons as does Furnham's (1982) work. There has been some Australian research of a similar variety but it has focused on explanations of unemployment among samples of youth (Feather and Davenport, 1981; Gurney, 1981; Feather and O'Brien, 1985). Our preliminary findings regarding beliefs about unemployment among Edmonton high school and university students suggest that there may be enough differences between unemployment attitudes of youth and of the public in general to prohibit direct comparisons.

4 One item referring to weak trade unions was dropped from the factor analysis because of a high level of missing data.

5 Furnham (1982) found items about sickness, bad luck, world wide recession and inflation, and automation (a rather diverse group of statements) all loading on his "fatalistic" factor.

6 It might be argued that the addition of "unemployment is high because" and "many people are unemployed because" phrases influenced these factor analysis results. However, the fact that Furnham's (1982) results can also be interpreted in this manner suggests that this is not the case.

7 The exception to this pattern is for the statement about the unemployed not trying hard enough to find jobs (the British sample members report more agreement). A comparison of this item to the other "work value" statements in Table 3 suggests that it is the British responses to this single item that are incongruent.

8 The indices were created by averaging the responses to the four items in each factor. Inter-item reliability is of moderate strength with Alphas of .66, .56, and .58 respectively.

9 These one-way analyses of variance and additional multiple regression results are not presented, but are available from the authors on request.

10 If more diverse groups had been studied, greater attitude differences would have been observed. For example, in his comparison of Australian shop stewards and middle level/senior managers, Emmison (1985:25) identified rather substantial differences in explanations of unemployment.

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